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Anne E. Doyle

Bridgewater State College, a5doyle@bridgew.edu

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DISHING THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE: ITS PRESENT CLASSROOM IGNOMINY, ITS CLASSROOM POTENTIAL

BY ANNE E. DOYLE

"My Summer Vacation," "My Family's Last Holiday," "My Most Memorable Experience"—if these composition topics call up unhappy memories for you, you are in good company. For much of this century, college English teachers and students alike have undergone torments while composing—or reading—essay assignments which ask for some sort of personal narrative under that most impersonal and fraught of circumstances: submitting the essay for evaluation and grading. Writing teachers complain that the results of such topic assignments are often bland, generalized narratives with little personal voice, while writing students sometimes complain that being required to write on a personal matter leaves them with a sense of invasion of personal space.

With such criticisms leveled at the use of personal narratives in writing classes, then why do writing instructors continue to assign personal narratives? The answer lies partly

in a set of ancient assumptions about the logic of writing and partly in seldom-questioned twentieth century assumptions about the cognitive development of the writer.

The concept of narrative as an element of persuasive discourse is quite ancient: in *A Theory of Discourse* (1971), University of Texas rhetorician James Kinneavy traces the classification of narrative as a "mode of discourse"—along with description, eulogy, and definition—back to ancient Roman schooling in preparation for training in rhetoric. As the ancient rhetoricians made use of them, these "modes of discourse" were not really purposes for writing but logical frameworks for writing. As recently as the nineteenth century, philosopher Alexander Bain's classification of the modes of discourse still included narrative—this time alongside description, exposition, argumentation and persuasion. (Notice that, in Bain's list, narrating seems co-equal with persuading and arguing—a step toward viewing narration as a purpose—and not an organizing principle—of writing.) Although many nineteenth century writing textbooks in both the United States and Great Britain eventually adopted four of Bain's five modes (persuasion was quickly combined with argumentation), textbook writers over time have rushed further to subdivide the logical process of exposition into more discrete textual structures (or rationales for certain kinds of textual structures), such as comparison, contrast, causes, effects, process analysis, etc. Yet they have continued to view narrative as organizationally simple (because of its temporal arrangement) and to assume a similar purity and simplicity in narrative's purpose.

Overall, textbook attempts to rationalize the question of text organization into bite-sized segments, or modes, has proved popular: the modes of discourse have become a handy mechanism by which to organize and speak of written texts, and the use of the term "modes of discourse" is widespread among teachers at the secondary and college levels.

By the middle of this century, the modes of discourse (including narration) had become such a staple of organization in writing instruction that they had long since entered the traditions of the college composition field. In 1976, Gary Tate's groundbreaking work on then-current writing research *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays* included an entire essay (of the ten) solely devoted to discussing research on the modes of discourse. To this day, one may still find in the tables of contents of college freshman readers a requisite bow to the modes of discourse—including narrative.

But this "modes" approach to writing focuses on the logical structure of a finished text, rather than on what the writer does while creating the text. In response to what is now a well-documented change in college student population in the 1960s, college writing instructors began to change the focus of their instruction from the finished text to the process by which a writer might achieve a finished text; this change in focus led directly to the development of a "writing process" pedagogy and to research on the ways by which successful writers created their texts.

These same composition instructors and researchers also began to ask whether the traditional modes of discourse simply described the structure of a finished text, or whether the modes had some psychological reality for a writer while the writer was developing the text. In other words, they began to question whether description, or narrative, or even comparison, referred to a psychological or cognitive analytical process as well as to the preferred structures of texts devoted to these modes. Their assumption that there was some such psychological reality led to a further conflation of narrative (the textual structure) with a single purpose of the personal narrative (to illuminate some facet of the self).

And narrative continued to be viewed as somehow inherently basic. For example, in 1968's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, English education theorist James Moffett asserted that both the thought processes of narrative and the genre of narrative made their appearances early in a child's life. He

suggested that narrative was a basic kind of discourse: that a child began a movement toward writing and literacy by beginning to narrate her day, aloud, to herself and to others. Others have also made some claim for the initial or "fundamental" nature of narrative. In their 1976 analysis of school writing in Great Britain, *The Development of Writing Ability: 11-18*, James Britton and his co-authors suggested that more personal forms of writing (like personal narrative) were necessary for a child's development as a writer. Their theory was that more public, communicative forms of writing (which they called *transactional*) grew out of the child's personal writing. Following

this logic, they considered reporting (a non-fictional genre akin to narrative) as a lower-level form of discourse essential for a writer's ability to master other, higher-level forms, such as generalizing.

With the influence of these works and others, narrative became enshrined in the lore of composition studies as a sort of base-line genre upon which other genres are built, and with which most students should be familiar long before college. To this day, many US composition instructors who assign a personal narrative to their students harbor the wistful assumption that, because the assignment is personal and narrative, it must be easier for their students to handle.

There was yet another reason for the focus on personal narrative within the 1960s. The expressivist school of writing instruction, at that time in the forefront of educational reform in writing instruction, taught that writing instructors should provide students with opportunities to write on topics which mattered to the students; the goal was the production of "authentically-voiced student writing,"—that is, writing in which the writer's honest and authentic positions

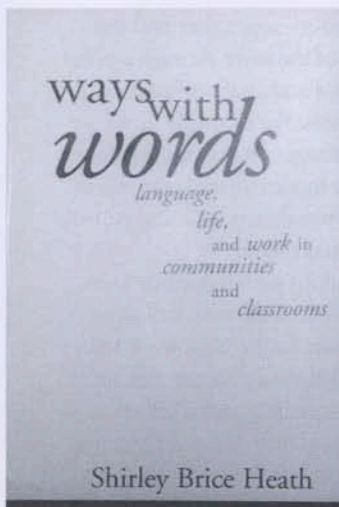
could be discerned by the readers—and the narrative was often extolled as the form of writing which offered students the least hindrance in their movement from ideas to text. If, as Moffett suggested, the narrative form was one early used and mastered by students, then its use in college writing classes could be a way to ease nontraditional writing students into the difficult task of writing and revising to clarify their thoughts. Further, if these students wrote narratives on the subject of their own experiences, then they would be dealing in the most positive way with the known and the familiar, and their stress in writing would be somewhat dissipated. Student writers would thus be able to focus their energies on shaping their texts to fit their evolving ideas.

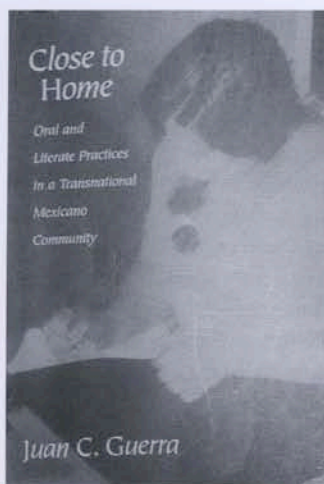
And so, despite its venerable age by the middle of this century, "My Summer Vacation" retained its place in the composition classroom, duly sanctified in its multiple roles: familiar topic which demands a familiar mode of discourse in response, and narrative topic which makes use of students' presumed facility with narrative. The personal narrative became known, in the expressivist school of writing instruction, as perhaps the best assignment with which to begin a writing class. In fact, the alliance of expressivist writing with writing process theory, which focused on idea generation and revision as well as on production of text, has led over the years to a conflation of writing process pedagogy with personal narrative pedagogy—so much so that many composition theorists today criticize writing process theory under the incorrect assumption that writing process instruction must *necessarily* focus on the personal narrative.

Today, on the eve of the new millennium, we teachers of writing still wring our hands and agonize over our students' lack of engagement or facility with the personal narrative. Accepting the lore that narrative is somehow basic and that to write about oneself is necessarily easy, we lay unwitting traps and deadfalls for our students in the shape of assignments like: "How I Got to Be What I Am Today" (a rather daunting topic for most eighteen-year-olds).

As rhetorician George Dillon of the University of Washington has remarked on many occasions, we all seem to have forgotten how sophisticated and difficult good narrative can be. In despair over poorly-formed and—frankly—sometimes boring personal student narratives, some college writing departments now contemplate eschewing the narrative discourse mode entirely; at a recent national conference on college composition, members of the Rhetoric Department at the University of Iowa announced a departmental decision to consider barring the use of personal narrative assignments in their freshman writing courses.

What is most ironic about this current state of affairs is that, in composition and literacy studies (two closely allied fields), narrative has never appeared livelier. For example Mike Rose's largely autobiographical work, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educational Underclass* (1990) has won several of the highest awards possible in composition studies; so too has Victor Villanueva's narratively-complex





Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color (1993), which interweaves theory with first- and third-person accounts of Victor Villanueva's intellectual odyssey. In both texts, the authors use narrative for the purpose of illuminating the writing and learning struggles of the educationally-deprived or the nontraditional student.

Further, since Shirley Brice Heath's 1983 publication of *Ways with Words* about the language behaviors of blacks and whites in a small area in the Carolina Piedmont, the ethnographic narrative has become a favored

method of research and publication in literacy studies. Such a narrative is a first-person account of the literacy practices of a community which the researcher has joined in order to study; wary of imposing a foreign pattern of interpretation on the literacy practices discovered during the research, the ethnographer is careful to use informants from the community in order to test the reasonableness of the patterns which seem to emerge from the data. Over the past fifteen years, readers in literacy studies have been informed, challenged, and educated by ethnographies of classrooms, of ethnic groups such as the Amish, and of other social groups such as members of an inner-city youth basketball league. These ethnographies have joined the case study and the phenomenological study in offering to readers a research narrative with a persuasive intent, in moving—at their best, with studied awareness and grace—from anecdote or illustration to analysis of that anecdote.

For example, in *Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community* (1998) literacy theorist Juan Guerra persuades his readers to reconsider the nature of literacy, to rethink the relationships of oral and written language, in an ethnographic narrative in which the characteristics of oral and written language intertwine in the language of his subjects, and in which their oral language sometimes demonstrates the characteristics more often ascribed to written language.

His subjects are members of a community of Mexicanos who live and work in extended familial or social relationships in both central Mexico and Chicago, Illinois; their principal language is a dialect of Mexican Spanish. Yet the story of this extended social group is strong enough that even non-Spanish speakers get caught up in the subjects' experiences (often recounted in their own words with a translation provided). For example, while telling the story of her most recent trip to Mexico, young Isobel writes for researcher/friend Guerra of her "last flirtation" before marriage. Readers of this passage—Isobel's story in her own words—will recognize how Isobel's writing has been influenced by her residence in the US: her language in writing is less flowery than that of her elders—it is more direct, even somewhat slangy. In Guerra's

account, readers can see how, over time, the shape of Mexicano life and literacy is changing for this transnational community as their families' connection with the US—through outposts of relatives working in Chicago—continues. But readers will also enjoy the human drama in stories such as Isobel's, where a young woman, affianced and on her own visiting at "home" in Mexico for the last time, harmlessly flirts with a young man at a dance.

Narrative, then, functions for the ethnographic researcher as a sophisticated device, offering opportunities for illustration, yes—but also providing a mechanism by which readers can perceive the ethnographic subject in rounded, human shape. As Guerra notes, the goal of an ethnographer is to "proliferate information about a culture, rather than to appropriate it" (10). To this end, literacy ethnographers work carefully to reveal their subjects in their narratives and carefully mark their movements from narrative to theory or analysis. The stories, powerful as they may be, usually center on the subjects.

Yet there is a point at which the ethnographer and the ethnography itself become part of the story. At such a point, any boundaries between narrative and analysis break down—narrative becomes analysis. For example, consider the narrative elements of this passage—its setting, atmosphere, characters—as well as the moves toward analysis which its author, University of Iowa rhetorician and cultural critic Ralph Cintron, begins to make here:

The conversation with Martin occurred inside Don Angel's apartment below the bare bulb which illuminated his bedroom/living room. Earlier that week Don Angel had left for Mexico to help bury his mother, and so Edmundo and I had the apartment to ourselves. Martin had dropped by to shoot the breeze, for awhile, but as the evening wore on, our talk began to "click"—at least in my head. . . . Martin without knowing it seemed to be laying out the structured emotional logic by which violence gets justified. . . . I want to begin my account at two or three o'clock on the morning of the tenth in that apartment that did not separate bedrooms from living rooms. . . . Edmundo and I were both somewhat worn out with Martin when he began to unfold the story. . . [which] concerned Martin, Fidel and Gonzalo, formerly close friends, who had been arrested months earlier for peddling narcotics. Martin. . . was being charged far more severely than Fidel and Gonzalo. Martin was bitter about this apparent unfairness. Moreover, the other two had never come around to console him for taking the bigger rap and, worse yet, Fidel had spread "lies" that Martin was behind the bust and had collected Crimestoppers' money for the betrayal. In short, he had received "no respect, no consideration" from Fidel and Gonzalo. (*Angels' Town*, 1997:147)

With these words, Cintron begins the central portion of his rhetorical critique of the culture of a group of Hispanic men in a city in Illinois. Subtitled "*Chero Ways, Gang Life*,

and the Rhetorics of the Everyday,” Cintron’s study offers a stunning analysis of what he calls “the logic of violence,” by which his subjects exact and offer respect, for themselves or to others, under conditions where the dominant culture would find little or no opportunity for respect. In the culture Cintron examines, respect is often the most precious or only possession one may have, and violence in language or deed is the mechanism by which one requites disrespect.

Cintron’s cultural critique, along with more “traditional” ethnographic pieces—if one can speak of ethnography as a “traditional” form at all—demonstrates the powerful impact of narrative upon the reader. As Cintron begins to tell the reader the stories of his two Angels and their lives and activities in Angels’ Town, he also begins to weave for readers the story of his own developing research. For example, at an early

point in his text, Cintron admits that his work fails to include much about the women of Angels’ Town: in an anecdote, he paints himself as a rather earnest researcher—camera in hand—who tries to photograph a group of girls engaged in styling each other’s hair, only to have them run as he approaches: his “highly direct walk, age, clothes, gender” mark him for these neighborhood girls as an outsider, an “other.” Throughout his text, we see the researcher alongside his subjects: sleeping at Don Angel’s apartment; driving around with a “thumper” (a young driver operating a

flashy car, sometimes with flashing lights and hydraulics, but always with a good sound system—hence *thumper*); awkwardly listening on the periphery as his research assistant Edmundo and Don Angel engage in a sophisticated game of *albures* (a Mexican language game where [most often] men engage in a conversation using words within their conventional meanings while also exploiting the words’ potential sexual meanings).

The entire text of *Angels’ Town* can be construed as Cintron’s narrative of his research, punctuated as it is by the individual narratives he tells about his subjects—among them Ramon, Martin, Don Angel, Valerio, and Valerio’s brother Angel. If the overall effect of this text is persuasive, its mechanism for persuasion involves the narrative, the anecdote, the illustrative example, and the carefully-recorded ethnographic field note.

Thus it must be confessed that, even as composition instructors bemoan the state of their students’ narrative essays, they are surrounded with potent examples of narrative at work in aid of exposition or persuasion—narrative, in other words, which takes experience—often first-person experience—and uses it to move the convictions of others.

To be truthful, some college composition instructors are already beginning to rethink the place of personal narrative within their courses—not to cast it out, as the University of

Iowa is threatening, but rather to embed it more completely within an instructional framework that allows students to see its persuasive and analytical potential. For example, there is a growing interest among composition instructors in the literacy narrative, which University of Kentucky professors Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen defined in a 1992 article in *College English* as

those stories...that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy...structured by learned, internalized “literacy tropes,”...by “prefigured” ideas and images...sometimes [including] explicit images of schooling and teaching; they include texts that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy. (“Reading Literacy Narratives” 514)

The literacy narrative assignment involves introducing students to the notion that they have lenses through which they interpret their own reading, writing, and learning experiences, and that these lenses shape the stories they tell about those experiences. Instructors who use the literacy history as a writing assignment offer students the opportunity to begin to see the nature of the narrative plots they use about their writing (“My teachers have always told me I am good at writing”...“I remember the first time an English teacher made me cry over my writing”...“I use my diary writing to make sense of my life”...“I have always been bad at writing”) as lenses through which they filter their experiences. Such an assignment moves students from banal statements to revisions that probe the banal, revealing its hidden importance (“Why do I depend on the teacher’s good will?”...“Why should that memory still make me cringe?”...“Why do I make such a sharp distinction between my diary writing—which I love—and the rest of my writing, which doesn’t interest me?”). Over succeeding drafts, the students become literacy researchers themselves, as they learn to recognize in their personal stories various examples of socially transferred metaphors and assumptions about writing and reading.

No, good narrative does not come easily to any writer. And though story-telling may make an early appearance in a child’s development, it takes a lifetime to master. Should it be taught in a college freshman course? Most definitely. But in a college essay-writing class, the narrative must be taught like any other form, and its power to do more than merely entertain must be explored. Given the narrative’s importance in qualitative research—in the case study and the ethnography particularly—the narrative should be taught to college freshmen as a form with persuasive and expository potential. Students in college freshman writing classes need to be assisted in seeing that the choice of a plot itself can betray a shaping ideology or analytical lens, and that thus narrative can be analytical as well as very persuasive.

Anne Doyle is Assistant Professor of English.

